A Conversation with James Baker Hall

(November 18, 2008)

by Arwen Donahue

By the time this interview took place, Jim had been ill for some time with rheumatoid arthritis that affected his lungs and hindered his breathing. He was hooked to an oxygen tank and stayed home all the time, except for occasional visits to the doctor. We had planned the conversation to be the first in a series, but we would meet only once more (see page 131).

Bearing in mind Jim's deep concern about the dangers of editing and censoring, I have aimed to edit with a light hand. The original two and a half hour conversation, recorded on audio, is housed in the archives of the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky, as is the February 2009 recording. I am grateful to Mary Ann Taylor-Hall for her help and guidance in editing this interview for publication.

As a friend and former student of Jim's, I knew the touchstones of his early life as an artist: his mother's suicide when he was eight years old, his encounter with T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" as an undergraduate. These memories and others had a talismanic quality when Jim spoke of them, charged with intensity and mystery. I approached this interview wanting to explore the landscape that held these touchstones, and connected one to another.

JAMES BAKER HALL: I had an early experience with art when I was eleven years old. I went to work in a commercial photography studio. I was the principal dark room person for several years, and that evolved into sort of anything and everything. There was a supply room that had several boxes and shelves of photography magazines that I got into, and I was at the studio sometimes twelve, fourteen hours a day. When I was there alone, I especially was attracted to these magazines, and I found some pictures in them that meant a whole lot to me—not many, but a few that I got very intensely attached to. And it was an experience of enchantment. The pictures in these magazines weren't of use to anybody except me, and I felt free to take the ones that I wanted out of the studio. There may have been, I'm thinking, a dozen pictures that I would go to for solace, for clarity, for peace, and they had a very important role in my life for several years. There was nobody around to share that experience with. My sister wasn't approachable about much of anything; certainly not something like that. My grandmother wasn't interested. I was living with my grandmother

and my sister. The secretary at the studio would look at the pictures if I wanted to show them to her, but that was it. There was nothing to do with that experience except treasure it, and it touched a part of my mind that I didn't even know was there really: the dreaming part of my mind. These pictures represented a very deep, deeply felt and energetic part of my intelligence that was untouched otherwise.

So I had that experience, and forgot all about it. I was a young athlete and when I was thirteen, fourteen, became increasingly consumed with athletics and then motorbikes and cars and girls. I didn't come back to art until I was in college, and I knew at that juncture that my playing days as an athlete were over and that my life was going to go off in some direction of my choosing. There wasn't any pressure on me from my family, which was basically my grandmother. But my father was still alive, at some distance. They wanted me to go to college but no more than I wanted to go to college, and there was no pressure to be this or that. In my family, everybody was either military or business. I think probably I had some idea of going to law school or—it was all very vague until I encountered "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," which spoke to that part of my mind that had been touched by those pictures early on and released an energy and a power and a force; released my dreaming mind, my passive mind. It gave it a shape, gave it something to be attentive to.

*"It was in an introduction to literature class that we read "*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.*" I'd never heard anything like that before. I'd never heard any of the important sounds that the language of that poem strikes: the candor, the honesty, the directness. I'd never heard a loose tongue before."*

That experience is so enhancing and so enlarging. You go into it a much smaller person than you come out of it, and it's so powerful, undeniable, transforming, exciting, that if you get it deep enough, art becomes really very important in your life. And Eliot led me to this that and the other thing, to many other writers—immediately, of course, to Pound, Wallace Stevens, Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald—and to painting, not directly from literature but from other influences that were concurrent. I got very responsive to modern painting, and then very quickly back into the history of painting.

ARWEN DONAHUE: Were these interests that you were pursuing on your own lead, or was one of your professors or some of your . . .

JBH: Well, these things came to me in classes, but it wasn't any teacher who inspired my interest. There were several teachers. Hollis Summers was the first one. It was in an introduction to literature class that we read "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." I'd never heard anything like that before. I'd never heard any of the important sounds that the language of that poem strikes, the candor, the honesty, the directness. I'd never heard a loose tongue before: I'd never heard soulfulness that's so loud and clear in the language of that poem.

AD: Did that have repercussions on your friendships and on your relationships with your family? It sounds like it was such a lightning-strike, sort of burning down what had been built already.

JBH: Yeah. It was. It changed my life in a way that separated me from my entire received culture, and family was the basic agent for that.

AD: What kind of fallout did that have?

JBH: Well, I was left so much on my own from the get-go. My grandmother took over the caretaking of my father's children after my mother's death with great purpose and intent. [She] had been left with the charge, received probably from her own conscience, for sure from her husband on his deathbed, to take care of these children, to raise these children. My father had been discredited as a parent in their eyes, and we were all living together in my paternal grandparents' house when my mother died. So, my seventy-five-year-old grandmother took up the responsibility to raise these two children, and I was, like, eight years old at the time she was seventy-five.

And she hung in there and did everything that she was expected to do. She provided us with order, a place to live, with meals, but after that it was sort of up to us. I had at least two jobs all the time, sometimes three. She would buy clothes if I needed them, but if I wanted this that or another pair of shoes or a suit or a motorbike or a car or something, it was up to me to get it. So I was independent early on as a youngster. When I began to find my own way, it wasn't a conversation going on with the remnants of my family, such that [my family] was changed or distressed by this change in me.

I was born in Lexington, lived out on the Paris Pike until my mother's death and then my grandmother moved into town and I lived in town with her until I finished college, and then I left for the west coast to go to graduate school. And I thought that (laughs)—how to put it, that whatever she felt about me leaving, there was going to be some kind of separation involved, some kind of grief, that she was not going to want to see me leave. But I think she was as relieved as she could be when I said, "I'm going now," because she was worn out and she'd done all she could do.

It was absolutely essential to my well-being, what she did for me. She gave my life order, and she made me feel cared for and loved. So when I left, whenever it was—twenty-one, twenty-two—to go to the west coast, I was then completely on my own. I continued to be in some kind of communication with my father and with his second wife. Until my grandmother's death, I would come back and visit her with some regularity, but I guess you'd say there wasn't any fallout. There wasn't any.

AD: You were really free, in a way.

JBH: I was free from early on. And my sister never was interested in anything that I was involved in, after I left athletics. There was a really very dramatic public scandal that preceded the tragedy of my mother's death, and we were a very respectable family who had fallen into the middle of this scandal, and my father's scandalous behavior. And [my sister's] response to that was just to focus exclusively henceforth for the rest of her life on regaining respectability, and I didn't care.

AD: Was she worried when you started getting interested in literature and truth-telling?

JBH: Yeah. (Laughs.) The truth-telling part of it scared my father and my sister.

AD: How did that play out?

JBH: Well, my first novel [*Yates Paul: His Grand Flights, His Tootings*] was [about] a kid who was on his own and worked in a photography studio. It was autobiographical in many ways, but Yates lived not with his grandmother but with

his father. It's the two of them in the house together, and the father was pretty inept and unattractive, an incompetent, emotional child. And I thought, well, this book might cause my father some distress. [But] I don't know whether he ever read it or not.

He was, in his Gary Cooper-ish way, withheld, and not technically voiceless, but he had very little to say about anything in my life except to give me such advice as he thought was part of his responsibility to deliver. But I did at some point in my mid-twenties write him a letter. I remember very vividly spending some time writing him a letter asking him to tell me something about my mother. Nobody would talk to me about my mother. I begged my grandmother to, tried to manipulate her into it many times, but she didn't want to talk about my mother. And so I asked my father, I said, "Listen, I don't know nothing about my mother. Would you tell?" And the letter went unanswered. I think I might even have said in the letter, "Look, I'm a writer. I got to know about my mama." You know, you got to know where you came from. I didn't know the story I was in, for God's sakes, and I'm sure that whether or not I said that, surely he did not want me to know the story of my mother because he didn't look so good. He looked like a scoundrel, and when he was off living with another woman and my mother was, in effect, a prisoner in the house of his parents, with the children being held hostage, she killed herself. And he looked like a scoundrel.

The only other thing I remember in particular is I had a story published shortly after the novel was published. I guess I was twenty-six when I wrote the novel and maybe I was twenty-eight [when] there was a story of mine in the *Saturday Evening Post* which, I remember, he did say he had read. He said, "I read your article." His wife was a reader and she was intensely uncomfortable with my father's children, as you can well imagine. She was the woman he was living with when my mother died, and she was very deeply implicated in the responsibility for that whole situation, of course. But she was a reader, and she and I used to have conversations about reading. She was a great lover of Anne Morrow Lindbergh, and I was a great lover of T. S. Eliot. [Laughs.] The two things represent reading, but of a quite different sort. And I liked her and enjoyed her company, but it, would last only for about ten or fifteen minutes at a time. Then she had to go to the kitchen or upstairs. Maybe she had some kind of generic appreciation of the fact that I was becoming an author. She certainly was likely to have read these things that I wrote, but as you can well imagine, it was all threatening.

AD: Was the story in the *Saturday Evening Post* something that was related to your family situation?

JBH: No. No. It wasn't an autobiographical story at all.

AD: And did your father say anything about it other than that he read it?

JBH: No. No. And, I mean, I could make up explanations or descriptions of what all was involved in their silence, but who knows? But art has a central role in my life. It is where I go to have my spirit delivered to me, clarified, enlarged, deepened, enhanced, guided, and it just didn't play any role at all in any of my family members' [lives].

AD: Did your granny have any response to this direction that your life began to take?

JBH: She just wanted me to (laughs) do anything I wanted to do, and to be a good boy, to stay out of trouble.

She had seen what was in my genes (laughs)—you know, had lived with the horror of it, and she was very, very, very successful as a single parent. And when you look at the fact that she was seventy-five years old when she started, it's quite remarkable what she did. She kept her mind to herself for her own reasons, and she might have understood that she was maybe the only one who was going to tell me what I needed to know about the story that I was in, but decided not to for her own reasons. She couldn't have seen my need to know that, and understood that she was maybe one of the two or three people who could tell me—I mean, I'm talking about *facts*—she couldn't have seen all of that and not risen to the occasion unless she had powerful reasons. You know, she'd been through it once. She was partly responsible for my mother's imprisonment. If it hadn't been for her presence, the children couldn't have been held hostage, so there was a great grief in that story for her. She was a victim, and she also had, I think, a role in it that she was deeply sorry for.

AD: You talked about how she was relieved when you said, "I'm leaving." Was the first time that you left Kentucky when you went to Paris?

JBH: Yeah. I was twenty years old. I had money saved from the paper routes that I had had for ten or some years, and I said, "Granny, I'm going to Paris." And I thought she would say, "Oh." [Tone of voiced surprised, perhaps dismayed.] Well . . . she said, "Okay." I said, "I don't know when I'll be back." She said, "Okay." [Laughs.] And that was remarkable. You know, I thought there would be some kind of trouble in that eventuality for her, and there wasn't.

AD: Huh. Well, she was glad to see you spread your wings.

JBH: Well, I really couldn't tell you what terms she brought to that turn of events, how she understood it.

There were occasions, I can remember now that I'm thinking about it, when I had a buzz from Edgar Allan Poe, when I was in high school, from "Ulalume" and "The Raven"; Poe's "misty mid-regions of Weir" poems and stories. They spoke to me from a world that I knew, personally; the "misty mid-regions of Weir" [Laughs.] I had grown up in the swamps of, in the middle of, in the miasma of. And I remember once wanting to talk about Edgar Allan Poe with her, and sitting on the hassock in front of her chair where she crocheted. She crocheted the last fifteen years of her life, and worked jigsaw puzzles. I used to love to be around her. She was one wonderful, neat, loveable spirit, and I can remember not showing her the picture of Edgar Allan Poe's home that was in the textbook for fear it would scotch the whole deal, you know. Poe's Baltimore house was a little shack; wasn't respectable at all. It was a distinctly lower class domicile, and thinking that whatever the name Edgar Allan Poe might mean to her would be completely displaced by the shabbiness of the life implied by that picture. I mean, Poe did have a pretty shabby life. But all of the excitements that I had having to do with the inner life, having to do with the dreaming mind, were my private experiences. I didn't know anybody who had anything like that going on.

AD: Did you have any close friends before you got to UK?

JBH: Yeah. I had plenty of them, but they were athletes and girlfriends.

AD: Did you maintain those friendships after you encountered . . .

JBH: No. There was a very significant and dramatic split at that point. I went off in a direction that none of my high school friends were interested in or responsive to or understood in any way that allowed our caring about one another to continue.

With most people that I had grown up with, that I was still in the same town with, and some of whom I was going to school with, there wasn't even any possibility that I would say, "You've got to read this poem. You've got to look at this picture. You've got to get interested. You know, let me show you what I'm excited about," because they weren't. They didn't care.

AD: Did they just let you go, or did they ask you, "What's gotten into you?"

JBH: Well, they just let it go. I mean, we didn't have to deal with one another, and I was getting prematurely bald at a fierce rate, and there was that. I didn't want to see these old friends because they'd stare at my hairline. Should I be saying this?

AD: You say whatever you want to.

JBH: I know, but I obviously am saying (laughs)—wondering whether or not I want it part of the public record in such a brief, sketchy form. Okay? Now if this story's going to be told, I ought to tell it, and not have somebody who might listen to this tape pick it up and do what they're going to do with it. (Laughs.)

AD: I think anytime you start talking on tape there's the possibility that what you say will somehow be distorted, and that's an intimidating possibility.

JBH: Yeah. And taken out of context and made of what the—well, that's the risk. And it is the liability of a loose tongue and of candor, and I seriously have been damaged and distorted and confused and misled and misused and da da da, by reticence and edited stories and tied tongues—my own among them—and I discovered, through the agency of an engaged mind, and literature as a guide and art as an aggregate spirit, that I don't want to continue that sort of censorship. Art loosened my tongue for a very good reason, and the list of things that I was taught that you weren't supposed to talk about, and if you were you were supposed to be self-protective and guarded, circumspect about, was long and deadly. And so I have been at war with that spirit and letter of censorship, as a working artist, all my adult life, and this conversation, which is being taped, is just another manifestation of that. If it was worth saying, if it was important—this business about my premature baldness—as an influence on my behavior at that time, then *say* it. *Name* it. Don't *hide* it.

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AD: I think that's what was so unique and amazing and wonderful for your students, that you brought us all back to that again and again, recognizing the ways that we all censor ourselves, and the power that gets packed into those things that we censor by virtue of not saying them.

JBH: For fear somebody will use them against you. Yeah. I mean, many, many, many lives are fairly seriously distorted and diminished by that kind of fearfulness, and I know what it's like not to show up for your own life. I know what it's like to be ashamed and self-protective. I know it as well as I know anything, and shame has been one of the inescapable givens of my emotional life. I *never* forget it. I know what it's like to be imprisoned by shame, and the fearfulness

that that brings to you; that you can disappear into. It's very easy not to show up for your life, not to take responsibility for it, not to have the ability to respond to it. It's real easy, and whose life is *easy* the friend of? You know? I mean, comfort is the enemy of joy, and there's a kind of nakedness and matter-of-factness that attends a full life that is full of abrasiveness and difficulty. It's a whole lot easier to keep your mouth shut than it is to talk about certain things, and if you want a full life, it's going to be full of regret, shame, hurt, failure, weakness, fear.

AD: Those friends who you encountered, did you feel at the time that they were more interested in whether or not you had hair on the top of your head than anything else about you?

JBH: Sure. Sure. Of course they were. The way in which you look, your appearance, was the given of your social life, and I don't know that I even knew I had an inner life until art made me aware of it.

That's not true. I mean, of course, I've been talking about ways in which I made a connection to my inner life in the story that I'm telling, but there was no social sanction of it in the culture that I grew up in. There was no interest in it. People did not want to know what your spirit was and how it was faring. I mean, in the language that I grew up with, your spiritual life was something that your church was responsible for, and it was all just formulaic, depersonalized injunctions.

AD: Did you go to church growing up?

JBH: Yeah. I did. We were members of the Maxwell Street Presbyterian Church. Granny wanted me to go to church and so I did. I went to Bible school, but it didn't have anything to do with my spirit. And I don't think it had anything much to do with the spirit of any of the people that I knew who were going to church. It had to do with their social respectability, like it was in your best interest as a member of the social set and especially as a businessperson (laughs) to go to church. Certain assumptions were made about your trustworthiness, about your acceptance of the social norms.

AD: After the rupture that "Prufrock" represented, did your friendships themselves change?

JBH: Well, I just made new friends. All the friendships that I had had before that were abandoned. I made new friends from the people that I was meeting in school, especially in writing [classes]. Hollis Summers was the teacher of that introduction to literature class that brought me to "Prufrock," but he was also my first creative writing teacher, and his interest in my talent was important to me, and nourishing, and his attentiveness to the early things that I wrote was meaningful, important. And my peripheral conversations with him in his office during conferences and such were important to me, and encouraging, and he was the only working writer that any of us knew, and we cherished Hollis in many ways. I'm talking about Wendell [Berry] and myself, and later on Gurney [Norman] and Ed [McClanahan] and other people who were taken seriously as aspiring writers at that time who had to do with the literary magazine *Stylus*.

Hollis was important, but he was not nearly, not *nearly* so important as Robert Hazel, who came in to fill in for Hollis when Hollis was on sabbatical leave, and then Robert stayed for six years and became a mentor. Hollis was really good in the classroom. Bob wasn't particularly interested in the classroom, but he was interested in a profound way and in an ongoing way in mentoring, in drawing out, the talent that he saw in his students. He would pick and choose

a few. The few that he picked he would pay a lot of personal attention to, and Wendell and I used to go out and visit him at his house all the time.

I do want to say something on this tape about Bob and about his influence. I'll also start out by saying that I have thought about this with some care, and I have written about Bob with some care. Anybody who wants to follow up on it and have it in a much clearer, more thoughtful and discerning way, should look up an essay that's called "Robert" that I wrote several years ago.*

Hollis, the first writing teacher, was the son of two Presbyterian ministers, I think, and was a very kind, gentle, decent, absolutely decent and very gifted man, but he was deferential and circumspect and was embarrassed before the ambition that attends most serious artists, could not be brought to think in such self-regarding ways about himself or anybody else, and Robert was the exact opposite. He was a young man, an ex-high school quarterback, and was in the Marines for a while. He prided himself on his looks and athleticism and his manliness. He had lived in New York and been a fan of jazz and came to UK from an editor's job at McGraw-Hill; considered himself on a first-name basis with all of the artists that he loved, living and dead. Whitman was Walt, Hart Crane was Hart, and so on.

He brought us into the circle of brotherhood and sisterhood that is available to people who are taken over by art. I have no problem at all in feeling very close to Rothko. I mean, I don't call him "Mark," but there are certain artists that I have a very deep spiritual intimacy with, and bond with, and think of with more affection and clarity and indebtedness than [I do] all but my close friends, all but my loved ones. And they *are* among my loved ones.

So Robert brought a bunch of us into the charmed circle of such thoughts and attitudes, and that was transforming. Nothing that Hollis had to offer was transforming, or if you would say that it was, it was only because you didn't know how deep transformation could be, and what being delivered from very obvious provincialism into something larger and deeper—what the consequences of such a transformation would be in your life.

Certainly Wendell and I were very close during those school years and thereafter, and we looked to Bob for confirmation of everything that we wrote, or the lack of confirmation, and we received from him—without being nearly so aware of it at the time as we would become—received a release, a permission, to take ourselves seriously in the brotherhood in a way that was essential to the force and direction of our lives. Bob thought that if you weren't trying to write the next "Wasteland," if you weren't living in literary history in that way, and if you weren't trying to enter literary history, that your basic question then was, well, why not? It's a very glamorous and infectious attitude for youngsters who want to take themselves seriously, who think they've got talent, to lay claims on some role in literary history.

So, Wendell and I were out there all the time, and became very good friends, or very close. We were Bob's chosen students, and then, later on, Gurney and Ed and then Bobbie Ann Mason. We were all at UK at, let's say, the same time, although I didn't know Bobbie Ann. She was a couple years, maybe three years behind. I knew that Robert took her seriously. I got to know Bobbie Ann later on. But there was a community of young aspiring talents under

* The essay appears in the Spring 2002 issue of *Southern Quarterly: A Journal of Arts in the South* (Vol. XL, no. 3, 27-40).

the guidance of a mentor who took his role quite seriously and who attended to us and prodded us.

Let's say, as an example of his guidance and influence, the fact that he thought we were all provincials—I mean we all *were* provincials in a very obvious way that we could do something about, i.e. go live in New York. His attitude towards that was to be taken at face value, and it also was emblematic of a larger, more encompassing attitude: get us out of the Kentucky idea of ourselves, into the idea that we were artists, and brothers and sisters at large with artists great and small.

All of that goes down in a fairly unadulterated way with youngsters, and as a very powerful and transforming influence, but there was a kind of *craziness* in thinking of your work in terms of literary history. I mean, Bob was an alcoholic and a seriously damaged man in a lot of ways; loveable, especially by his students, but not what you'd call a good model. He was a loose horse and a drunk, and when he'd get drunk enough, he would coerce his beautiful wife Pat Kacin into saying, oh, what was the line, "Whitman, Crane, Thomas . . . and Hazel." And there was something crazy about that as a frame of reference, about that as a way of thinking about yourself.

Robert's poetry, the best of it, is really very significantly undervalued. His fiction's another matter. I don't think there's anything in his fiction that I want to push people toward, but I think he's deserving of attention he hasn't received. And the poetry, some of it, is astonishing, and he *is* the inheritor of Hart Crane's language and spirit, and maybe to a lesser extent Dylan Thomas's, and [he] left his own signature on the continuation of that spirit. People ought to read his poetry. I think you hear a lot—at least in the circles that we're in right now—about him as a teacher, and not enough about him as a poet.

AD: Did you read his poetry at the time that you were a student?

JBH: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. In manuscript. And he was writing a many-volumed novel about a young hero that was autobiographical and quite absurd, and he was writing two different kinds of poems: one dense, Crane-esque, Thomas-esque, and another very thin, minimal, sparse language. They were always in spring binders there in his house, and he would give them to us to read and we would read them and be influenced by them.

There was nothing quite like taking your latest manuscript to Robert and, you know, leaving it with him or sitting there while he read it. He had books that he would talk about, writers that he would talk about. Of course, we read everything that he told us to read, and we had a lot of conversation about what we were reading, what we were thinking.

At this time, many of the poets of interest to us were also men of letters and wrote criticism, and so we were reading, as well as the poetry of Pound and Eliot and Stevens and William Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore, the fiction of—well, we'll get off on that list if we want to—but we were reading Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom and Yvor Winters and R.P. Blackmur, Kenneth Burke, [William] Wimsatt—we were reading books of criticism and talking about that.

AD: That was near the time that the New Criticism was really coming to the fore.

JBH: That was the New Criticism. The single most important book, for probably two generations, was *Understanding Poetry* by Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks. Cleanth Brooks was not a poet, but he was a critic. He wrote a book called *The Well-Wrought Urn* that we all read. He and Warren collaborated on

a book called *Understanding Poetry* that was the standard textbook used in all universities. I say all, I think probably *all*, and probably in high schools, and so it had very wide circulation in our generation of students, and then had a very deep influence on us, which we then carried into teaching.

So it really did have a central life for two generations and maybe longer, in which the way to read poetry was taught to you by Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks, and it involved analysis. The poets that had a leg-up, if you approached poetry in that way, were the poets that you could talk about; the metaphysical poets were very big. Irony [and] paradox were very significant considerations in the poetry that was fostered by that approach. I didn't give up the influence of *Understanding Poetry* or books of Warren, their way of reading, until—God, I was in my fifties, well, maybe before that, before I said, "That's not the way I connect with poetry anymore."

AD: What was it about it that wore out?

JBH: It tended very powerfully to confuse your thoughts about a poem with the poem, and to favor explanation to experience. We didn't memorize poems under the influence of Brooks and Warren. We weren't taught to listen to poems. We were taught to think about them and to take them apart and then put them back together again, and it was always part of the drill, after you had taken a poem apart and discerned how it worked and the way all the elements were mutually influential, that you read the poem aloud, and this was supposed to be putting it back together again. And that was an insubstantial claim. I mean, it's not so easy to put a poem back in its own realm after you have . . . .

> ***"It's very easy not to show up for your life, not to take responsibility for it, not to have the ability to respond to it. It's real easy, and whose life is* easy *the friend of?"***

AD: Turned it into a machine?

JBH: Yeah. After you have appropriated it, turned it into something to think about and to write about. The way in which "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" was approached in the classroom was quite different from the way I ended up related to it. I had to work through all of that. I had to work through the academic overlay in order to get to the poem, and if you are working in a classroom with a bunch of poems, you're obliged to get something out of them, you know? You're going to go to the next class and somebody's going to ask you what you got out of this poem, and your credibility as a participant in the conversation, as a student in the class and da da da, is predicated on getting something out of it. And I don't think you're *supposed* to get something out of a poem. I think a poem is supposed to find something in you, and if that doesn't happen, it's not a poem for you.

The passive mind is *persona non grata* in the classroom, in school in general. The educational establishment cannot distinguish between the passive mind and laziness. You've got to be using your mind, and the part of the mind that you can use is the part of the mind that you can *use*, and that you can pursue with, that you can ferret out, that you can track goals. It's a very powerful resource in our intelligence. I don't mean to diminish it in any way, but it's a *part* of it, and the passive mind is equally important: the dreaming mind, the part of the mind where you're open to things coming to you. When I read a poem, I listen to it and I let it go in one ear and out the other. I deal only with what sticks, and

if something sticks it usually draws me back to the poem. I listen to it again, and if I'm called back to listen to it again then it's starting to be poetry. It's starting to be a poem. It has found something in me.

I'm not saying that I don't think inquiry has a role; that you can't ask questions; that you can't say, "I don't understand what this means. What does this mean?" But I am saying that there's a very limited role for that inquiring mind in the experience of art. You know what I mean?

AD: Sure.

JBH: A friend of mine was telling me, [who is] living in New York City and whose daughter is enrolled in a high school of choice for aspiring young artists there, that the first conference that they had with the teacher, the teacher said, "Your daughter's too dreamy. She sits around dreaming all the time." And I mean, yeah. (Laughs.) Most artists do. They sit around daydreaming, and they're very attentive to what goes on in their nighttime mind and the part of their mind where inquiry, analysis is not running the show.

AD: Was inquiry and analysis running the show when you went over to Bob Hazel's house and talked about poetry?

JBH: It had a role, but no. As a matter of fact, that's a very interesting question, Arwen. No, it didn't, but we didn't read out loud very much to each other. If you said, "I really like 'Ash Wednesday'," Bob would say, "Have you read what Blackmur's got to say about 'Ash Wednesday'?" Where analysis and thoughtfulness was eloquently laid to the page, but we rarely sat around saying, "What does this mean? What's this got to do with that? What's part two got to do with part one?" We didn't do that.

When I say we, I should try to be more precise about it. I'm usually talking about Wendell and myself, because we conversed on the subject many times over the years and tried to sort out what was invaluable and transforming in Bob's influence on us from what was embarrassing and childlike, childish, crazy, testosterone-poisoned, foolish, at times almost cartoonish. We, in our own quite separate ways, came to be—I don't know what the right word is—confused about Bob. We owed him so much, and tried to act like it. He didn't get tenure at UK, but wherever he was, wherever we were, we stayed in erratic touch and we continued to visit, and he went through one marriage after another in increasing physical deterioration because of his drinking and his aging. We tried to ignore what we didn't know how to respond to, and that worked sometimes. Sometimes it didn't. And tried to stay in touch with what we held dear: Bob's work, certain of his personal characteristics; and tried to keep clean our deep indebtedness to him.

One of Bob's problems was he kept coming on to women of all (laughs) ages and positions, his students included, and I think that his relationship with most women was complicated by a kind of vandalism, a kind of sexual posturing and—I'm missing the word that I want—and maybe that was the case with many of his female students of talent, because the students that remained the most expressive of their indebtedness to Bob were mostly male.

AD: Through Bob, you were connected with a lineage of world-class artists, none of whom would have necessarily had any connection with the culture that you came from. Did he have any sense of where you came from?

JBH: Yes. Yes. He prided himself on being from rural southern Indiana. He prided himself on knowing something about country people, country ways of life. And he was a poser, and that caused Wendell considerable embarrassment when

he would come to visit Wendell [at his home in Henry County] and act like he knew his way around the people that were around Wendell. It was very often false, and Bob thought that he was a country boy and that that was where he began and got to be a city boy because he wanted to be and needed to be in order to round out his experience. And he never gave up writing about things rural and farming people and rural sensibilities, rural ways of life.

AD: What about southern sensibilities? Did you all have a sense of yourselves . . . .

JBH: As southerners? Yes. Very much so. It was the case at that time that southern literature was in its heyday, Faulkner being the principal international southern-American widely-read writer, but there were many others: Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, Robert Penn Warren, Peter Taylor, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and then [James] Dickey, William Styron and others. I'm probably forgetting some people that are on that short list, but southern writers were hot when we were coming on, and that lasted into, let's say, certainly the late fifties, maybe on into the early sixties, then it was displaced by Jewish writers and Jewish subject matter and then that was displaced in short order by black, African American writers and subject matter and then homosexual, gay literature. In the publishing industry, it got to be a kind of a marketing device that a new group was identified. And then the feminists and then da da da da, and now it's international writers.

We were identified in our thinking about ourselves very much as southern writers, but not very much with the Civil War. A lot of people who think of themselves as southerners, certainly in my generation, very much identified with the Civil War and with the families that were formed by the war, and the war did not loom large in our southern identities at all.

AD: Well, was part of the magic that Hazel offered the ability to give you a sense of connection with that southern literature that you were related to while also expanding it beyond that?

JBH: A little, but we had a particular affection for Faulkner that was above and beyond and around the edges of his greatness as a writer, because he was a southerner, and not so much with Robert Penn Warren, or Miss Eudora, or—Carson McCullers is another writer on that short list that I didn't think of. But part and parcel of thinking on the grand scale about all of these things was that nothing so potentially local as regional identification got very far.

Joyce, Eliot, Pound, the French that preceded them, all of these writers were equally important in the realm of our imagination in the brotherhood who of course had no southern connections at all; no southern American connections at all. And there were a couple of other teachers at UK, one especially—Robert Jacobs—who taught southern American literature, and so had taught a course on Faulkner.

And when all of those writers—Bobbie Ann excepted, but Wendell, Ed, Gurney and myself—went to Stanford as Stegner Writing Fellows, and no other school had sent four people to the writing program on fellowship at Stanford, much less bang, bang, bang, bang right four in a row, the assumption was there was a writing program at UK and it was particularly successful. The fact is, there was no writing program at UK. It was Robert Hazel. There was a 207 class called creative writing; there was a 507 class called creative writing. That was it. And I think that Hazel's presence and influence and the brotherhood of those four or five people—or six or seven. There's a couple that were sort of in the same group on a short list, if you had one, that didn't go on to be writers. But

it was the presence of us together that helped each of us. I think that certainly was the case with Wendell and with me. We walked one another up.

AD: Was Wendell the first significant friend that you made after that break occurred in your life?

JBH: Yes. Yes. Wendell and Bill Pemble—W.W. Pemble, who was the most brilliant at the time of all of the students there at UK, but he was only there for two semesters, I think, and had just gotten out of the coastguard, was twenty-six, was worldly, cynical, and everybody that met Bill thought he was something special; not just as a writer but as a spirit, a traveling spirit. And he was. He was quite unlike anybody else. So he was a friend, but Wendell was the one that I hooked in with, who hooked in with me.

AD: Do you remember how that happened?

JBH: Well, we met in a writing class. I remember that. He had a reputation already as the favorite of Hollis. As a writing teacher, Hollis had a very high opinion of Wendell, as anybody would. So he was known to all the rest of us who were in the classes. Wendell was known to me before I actually saw him, but I actually saw him, I remember, for the first time in a class. He was sitting over next to the window, staring out the window with his long leg up on the chair next to him so you couldn't sit close. (Laughs.)

And then we really took up. I started visiting him in Henry County on a kind of regular basis. He'd stay over, and we hung out in town. We exchanged manuscripts. He never wrote anything that he didn't give me a copy of. I never wrote anything that I didn't give him a copy of. We were full of anticipation of the ongoing conversation, passing books back and forth, and that connection continued for years. I was his principal reader for a work in progress for twenty years, and he likewise. I did a lot of very close reading and editorial work on Wendell's early work, and on up through *The Memory of Old Jack*, whenever that was published. I did a lot of cutting on *The Memory of Old Jack*, and argued with him about some things, and he took my advice in the main. I cut a lot of pages out of that book, and then the next one, the Sierra Club book. What was that called? *Culture and Agriculture*.

AD: *The Unsettling of America*.

JBH: *The Unsettling of America*. There wasn't so much that I could do with that manuscript and some of what I did—I didn't do very much—some of what I did, I remember, he didn't take my advice. Maybe some he did. (Laughs.)

AD: When he started writing more explicitly about agriculture, did that represent the . . . .

JBH: Well, the more he became a polemicist, the more he became an essay writer, the less use I was to him. As a poet and as a fiction writer, I heard very clearly when the preacher came in, usually unsuccessfully, and could help him keep that kind of didacticism, if not out, then tuned-down. But the more he became an essayist, the more he became the author of *Citizenship Papers* and a lecturer, the more empowered the voice of public debate and public policy became in his writing, the less use he had for me. I mean, he can think much more deeply and clearly and inclusively about those matters than I ever could, and I'm not as interested in that language as he is.

We reached a point by the time he published his first *Collected Poems*, we had been at it for twenty or twenty-five years, you know, passing manuscripts back and forth, and we had worn out our usefulness to each other. He knew everything that I was going to say, I knew everything he was going to say, and

we sort of quit listening. And I remember writing him in response to his first *Collected Poems* and saying, "I've read these poems more times than you have over the years, more times. I couldn't be more familiar with this work, and here are the poems that I think are the best, and they're all the singer poems. And here are the poems that I think are messing your work up. They're the preacher poems and the didacticism," and we'd been through it so many times by then, it's like, "That's the last time."

AD: Was that dynamic in place between you from the beginning?

JBH: Yeah. You could not find two more different people than Wendell and myself; absolutely, fundamentally, oriented differently. He thinks judgment is at the heart of intelligence, and I don't. He receives in order to correct, and I receive in order to get. I don't know how to put it.

We've been, you know, at loggerheads over that from the time we were kids. The arguments that we've had have been fierce, intense, unyielding, ongoing and irreconcilable. I can remember Tanya once listening to us go on. She was in the kitchen with her back to us. We were at the table, and at some point at a lull in the argument, she said, "You guys are the most different" [Laughs.] – "you're the most different people I've ever seen in my life," and she was right.

Part of my value to him was that I would argue with him. He loved the resistance, the clarification that came to his thinking when he had to argue with me. And I didn't. It wore me out. It exhausted me. I don't like to argue.

AD: Well, what did he offer to you?

JBH: Oh, God. His contribution to my life is *immense* and profound. I mean, he introduced me to nature, for one thing. Being out and about in the natural world with Wendell was just marvelous. He's at his best. He didn't feel obliged to judge nature, you know. (Laughs.) He let the squirrels alone, and he knew stuff, and he was always pointing things out. And I was always looking to see what he was pointing at and getting something from it. I was taught how to be a good boy, and his heritage taught him how to be a good man, and the difference was very significant.

> ***"[Wendell] had an interesting mind, and he had a lot of talent, and he knew what his subject was from the get go. What most of us have to live twenty or thirty years to get in the presence of, he started out with."***

He had this extended family that I knew, I mean, I knew everybody he knew. He had this neighborhood, all these people around, and he loved them, knew about them, talked about them; I cared about them, I knew about them, I talked about them, I went to see them. He gave me a whole world, a family-centered world. I got to know his father and mother. His children grew up in front of me. And his mentor, Owen Flood, I'd go over there all the time. So he gave me a role in a formed, coherent world, and I was the cherished friend from Lexington. And I knew how to behave, like Bob didn't. (Laughs.) You know, I knew to keep quiet, to speak when spoken to, to listen, and I mean it was no problem. I was privileged to be in the presence of all of that. And still, when we see Wendell, I have a long list of people I want to know about, you know. How is so and so?

AD: So he offered you not just a friendship, but a family and community?

JBH: Sure. Absolutely. And a literary intelligence that was—he had an interesting

mind, and he had a lot of talent, and he knew what his subject was from the get go. He knew his attitudes. What most of us have to live twenty or thirty years to get in the presence of, he started out with. I mean, I don't like this way of talking, but he knew what he had to say. He knew the stories he had to tell, or wanted to tell. He knew the point.

AD: So, did it seem determined from the start when you knew Wendell that he was going to go and write about Port William?

JBH: Yes. Yes. He was doing it right, you know, for the classes in school. He was writing about Nathan Coulter and his brother in the stories that we were reading in the workshops. Yeah. There never has been, that I know anything about, such continuity in a person's work from age twenty to seventy-five.

AD: Were Gurney and Ed more reverent of Wendell than you were, do you think?

JBH: They weren't interested in arguing with Wendell. I remember out on Wendell's front porch once, there were a bunch of us standing out there, and somebody said, "That son of a bitch has got to be right all the time." Gurney said, "He *is* right all the time." (Laughs.)

[But] I revered Wendell. I was the first president of the Wendell Berry fan club, and I was the first person who insisted at length that he was a national treasure. I had reverence for Wendell and still do. For years I knew what Wendell was thinking, you know, however silent he was, or at least I thought I did, and I usually had reason to [think that]. We were very intellectually intimate. I mean, when I say we're arguing all the time I mean that, but you're very intimate with who you're arguing with all the time. Right?

Well, there were several controlling images in the formation of Wendell's preoccupations and his attitudes, and one of them was "something to come up against." He was raised to believe that there were certain hard-asses that were essential to your maturation—always a guy. "Something to come up against" was something that you *wanted* to come up against; you wanted to test yourself—you wanted to measure yourself.

There were two or three of those in his life, and a couple of them were teachers at UK that he and I shared. We used to love to talk about A. K. Moore, Arthur Moore that way. Arthur Moore was a real hard-ass, and it was down to the point where there were only two or three students who would take his classes because he was so hard. I remember taking his class in the lyric in English. There were three people in there: Wendell and me and Marilyn Jones. And we used to love Dr. Moore's belittling, and, you know, he talked out of the side of his mouth and he called us "boys." And, I remember Arthur Moore said, "Here comes Hazel with his dick in one hand and his poems in the other." (Laughs.) We just loved that, and that's one of the things I got from him, was love and affection and respect for "something to come up against." It didn't last all that long with me. About twenty years of that is enough. Less.

But there were several of those. Another one was "the few good ones left." That was a formative idea in Wendell's inheritance, "the few good ones left," and I didn't exactly understand what that meant at first. "A few good ones left." Well, am I one of them? Of course not, you know. I mean, of course not.

AD: Was it about art?

JBH: No, no. It's about manhood and stewardship and patriarchy and a way of life. You couldn't be one of the few good ones left just by wanting to be, but if you did want to be one of the few good ones left, you looked like Wendell. (Laughs.)

You didn't have a TV or a computer or da da da da, you know what I mean.

AD: I'm interested how you traced that Wendell was a polemicist basically from the beginning to some extent, and that he over the years became more and more of a polemicist and that you parted ways over that, because your sensibility is so opposite. Yet you also mentioned that you have a real interest in each others' minds. And I'm wondering how that interest engaged at that time in your life. The atmosphere at UK that Hazel was bringing in of encouraging you to think about being at the center of the universe, not thinking of yourselves as being off to the side in a little backwater province—well, even though he was saying you are off to the side, he was saying you don't have to be. And at the same time, you've got this phenomenon, Wendell Berry, who's totally fiercely devoted to this particular place, and you've got your sensibility, you have this ability to plug into a self that's embodied but that is not dependent on the cause and effect of historical action or the things that are happening. It's not that history isn't relevant to you, but more relevant is something that's lying underneath that story. This really isn't a question. It's sort of an observation.

JBH: Well, it's a very good one. I know what you're driving at.

AD: And yet somehow you and Wendell and Gurney and Bobbie Ann and Ed all wound up staying here in this region, and . . . .

JBH: Well, I think Bobbie Ann and Wendell, and certainly Gurney and Ed, all four of them stayed for reasons quite different from mine. I stayed because I had unfinished business here and I came back because I needed a job. I found out that I needed the job (laughs) for more than one year and then more than two years, and so I kept the job and it wasn't long until I realized that I was here for deeper reasons than that; that I had unfinished business; that I did not know what story I was in. For all of my autobiographical writing and musings and preoccupations, I hadn't known what story I was in, and I was in the story of the [Laughs.] – sort of guy who didn't know what story he was in.

So I had to find out, you know, and I was in my fifties before I found out that my mother loved me. Jesus, you know, get your head around that. My mother killed herself in my bed when I was eight, and if you get down to psychic bedrock, I thought I did it. I did not know that my mother loved me. I found out from sort of pure out and out investigation, talking to the people who had known her, and figuring things out, that I was the last thing in the world she loved. I was what she was holding on to when she went down.

It's like Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve were loved by God and they got expelled from it. They got driven out of mother love. They got driven out of unconditional love into the fallen state. I had mother love that I didn't know about, and I was in my fifties before I discovered that I wasn't responsible for my mother's death. I was a victim of my mother's death, and I didn't cause it—it wasn't a failure on my part. She was in a story that overwhelmed her, and I happened to be in there with her. And then I was in the story thereafter of somebody whose experience was erased. Mother love was replaced by shame. That's fucking what happened to Adam and Eve, isn't it? I mean, it's rudimentary stuff. If you've never been loved, if you've never experienced mother love, unconditional love, that's one thing. If you have experienced it and then forgot about it and it was replaced by shame, that's another story, and that was the story that I was in, have been in. And I was fifty-plus years old before I figured that out and then, you know, it was like, *Doing*!

AD: How did you figure that out?

JBH: Well, by talking to people and by—one of the things that kept me from understanding that was I had seen my grandmother's life differently than I ever had before, and I had to see that the only adult that I trusted, the only adult that really took care of me and that looked after me, was much more complex than that and she had been complicitous in the unintentional but irrevocable imprisonment of my mother. And she was complicitous in her destruction—not in a fundamental way; certainly not, I don't think, consciously. But I couldn't face that. I mean, it's hard to face a protracted ignorance of that sort about yourself. I did not want to face my father. I did not want to see how paralyzed my heritage was. I did not want to see the ways in which my grandmother could have helped me, should have seen the need to help me, that she was unable to.

The story that I'm telling makes my father out to be much more of a simple person and much more of a simple scoundrel than he, I think, was. A lot of people—women loved my father. I'm telling the story of his son, and it is not fair to Walker R. Hall. There was more to him than being my father, but my father should have helped me, and he should have seen the ways in which only he could help me. And I didn't want to know that [he wouldn't]. I didn't want to see that. I didn't want to see what a fucking fool I had been all those years. I mean, I was an adult, dealing with him after a while, and I should (laughs)—you know, I should have gotten up in his face and said, "What the hell happened, you know, that you left off on me?" I didn't want to do any of that, and if you're mind-fucked that deeply, that deeply confused, after a while you get beholden to that confusion. After a while you get implicated in it as an agent of it, and so it's hard to unlock. It's hard to—what do you call it—dismantle.

So it just took a long time for me to want the truth of my life badly enough, right at the last minute, to be able to talk to people who knew my mother. My aunt had been waiting for years for me to come and say, "What the hell happened?" And then she just, she unloaded. She said, "I didn't think you were ever going to want to know." And I did not *want* to know as much as I *needed* to know about my grandfather, after whom I'm named, James Baker Hall. I'm James Baker Hall, II. I didn't *want* to know as much as I *needed* to know about my sister. She was thirteen [when my mother died]. I was eight. She just turned her back and walked off on the whole thing, and left me there in the middle of it. I was the only person in town that didn't know the story I was in, and . . . .

AD: So she knew what the scandal was?

JBH: She knew what was going on. She knew what had happened, what had gone down, and so all of this was, basically, fundamentally in defference to patriarchy. Didn't want Jimmy to know what happened to his mother and what happened to him because it would hurt Walker's feelings. And I didn't want to know that about patriarchy. I didn't want to know any of these things. I didn't want to know what a danger to stability and to full realization patriarchy can be. I didn't want to know how paralyzed we all had been for so long at such consequences, and it wasn't just what had been visited upon me. What had been visited upon me, the confusion, was visited in turn on my loved ones. I acted out of that ignorance and confusion and perpetrated it. So, I broke up my second marriage, as the first in the early stages of breaking up that monolithic paralysis in the middle of my psyche. Who was it that said that art's main purpose in our life is to break down the frozen soul?

All of this commenced out of a question that you asked, that I've forgotten.

AD: Well, it wasn't even a question. It was about the circumstances that led to you being here, to staying in Kentucky.

JBH: Oh, yes. When you said that history had nothing to do with my history, you were absolutely right. It's got a great deal to do with Wendell's mind and heart, history, and Gurney's; not so much to do with Ed's. But Bobbie Ann, they're all living in history, of the sort that is shared by other people. I'm living in the history that's not. It's outside time, and it's private, and it is – I don't know how to say this, you know. By outside time I mean, it's in eternity. It's timeless.

AD: Do you think it would be fair to say that as a writer, as an artist you're more of a modernist than the rest of the people that you just mentioned? It seems to me that what you're talking about is a sensibility that informed Rothko, that informed Motherwell, that informed Kline, that informed Eliot and Stevens: just a basic interest in the qualities of language and the qualities of vision, and that you've remained kind of circling around that very basic experience in a way that it seems the rest of your UK colleagues have been more interested in regional issues, whether Kentucky or elsewhere.

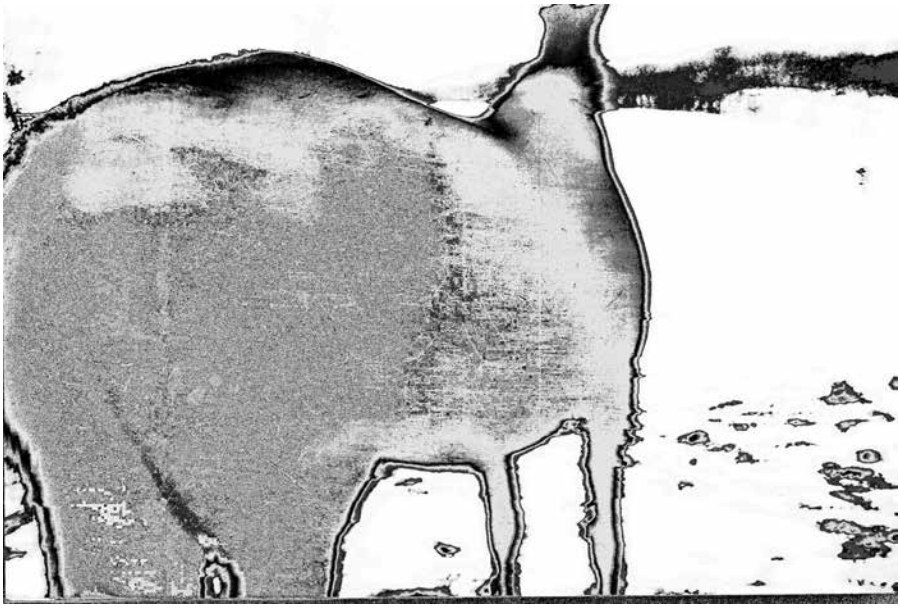
JBH: Uh-huh. I think there's probably some real insight involved in that question and that, yes, there is fundamental difference and it does sort out along those lines. I remember a conversation I had with Jane Vance who was, still is, the poet laureate of Kentucky — will be for another few months — a conversation I had only a few days ago, in which we were talking about the role of the poet laureate. There's one qualification in the description of the role of the job: How is the work that this writer has done informed by living in Kentucky? And you're supposed to get a pass on that question before you meet the job description, and certainly my work has been informed by living in Kentucky, but certainly not in the same way that Bobbie Ann's or Wendell's or Jane's is. I mean, the difference between Jefferson County and Fayette County, Knott County and Knox County and Bell County and all that doesn't interest me. I don't think they interest artists.

> ***". . . art has a central role in my life. It is where I go to have my spirit delivered to me, clarified, enlarged, deepened, enhanced, guided . . ."***

I was saying, "Look, the poet laureate goes into this one room after another after another after another with different people, and the basic resource that's involved is being able to figure out who you're in the room with and what common ground you have and how to seed it." And Jane said, "Yes, I agree, but if you have Kentucky and things Kentucky in common, the ground is larger." Well, the common ground is larger, and I think that the common ground is, you know, childhood, family, parenthood, sickness, suffering, jealousy, love, betrayal. I think that those are the common grounds. It's got nothing to do with local color. Local color is the texture in those stories, and the difference between Knox and Knott County and Bell County, Fayette, central Kentucky and eastern Kentucky, they don't bear on those things. I don't mean to carry on an argument with Jane in her absence. What she was saying was to be taken at face value and credited.

AD: But in some way you see yourself as having landed in Kentucky as not being out of a commitment to the place per se, but as being a commitment to the story that you need to tell.

JBH: To the unfinished story here for me. Yeah. I mean, pertinent to this whole subject is the fact that the first time I crossed the Continental Divide I felt more at home than I ever had before, you know, and I was grown. If you're talking about a place where I feel at home, it's California, the coast. I mean, there are places out there, one after another after another after another, where I want to stop and live the rest of my life.



All Present

photograph by James Baker Hall